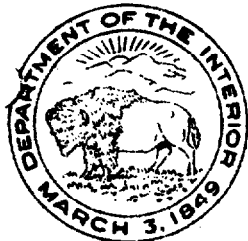


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# DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

## INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

*See 4/10/56*

For Release APRIL 9, 1956

### FWS PERSONNEL ALERTED AGAINST OKEFENOKEE FIRES

Precautionary measures are being taken to prevent the fires now burning just outside the southern boundary of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in Georgia from getting into the refuge area, Secretary of the Interior Douglas McKay said today. The Secretary said the refuge staff had been alerted and fire fighting apparatus moved to a nearby point. The fires, which are on state and private lands, are being kept under control at the present time.

Service officials do not fear a recurrence of the disastrous fire of 1954-1955 because of the condition of the swamp which is now well saturated with a normal water content. In October 1954 when the big peat bogs of the refuge were tinder dry because of the severe drought, fires started and burned continuously until quenched by the heavy rains of June 1955. In the meantime, 284,000 of the 309,000 acres of the refuge had been burned over with a heavy loss of wildlife and vegetation. Most serious losses were the big cypress and gum trees which cannot be replaced for hundreds of years. Native wildlife and smaller vegetation is already making a comeback although the area now is bleak and desolate.

Okefenokee, a place of primeval beauty, became a national wildlife refuge in 1937. It has been and will continue to be administered under a government policy of retaining all of its wilderness values in a natural, untouched state.

Periodic fires have plagued Okefenokee for decades but there have been none as devastating as that which had its origin in the drought of 1954. In 1910 and in 1932 there were severe droughts and accompanying fires in the Okefenokee swamp. Neither of these fires covered as much area, burned so deeply into the peat nor did the damage to the big trees as the 1954 fire.

Okefenokee is drained by the Suwanee River which flows to the southwest and by the St. Marys River which flows eastward. Half a century ago an effort was made to drain the swamp and a canal was cut through the low ridge dividing the two watersheds. This accelerated the lowering of the water level.

Construction of two "sills" or very low stream obstructions just high enough to hold the water table of the swamp near the surface would prevent a recurrence of the devastating fires, Fish and Wildlife Service officials say. One of these would be placed across the canal to retard the double drainage and the other would be installed on the Suwanee River at the border of the refuge. These two low barriers could be installed without infringing upon the natural beauty of the area in any way, either during or after installation, Service officials declare. The sills would be low and would not affect the flow of water in normal years but in periods of drought would retain enough moisture in the swamp to prevent the peat bogs from becoming tinder boxes.